

## Homily: Fourteenth Sunday of the Year (July 8, 2012)

### Prophecy in Our Times

Homily by Fr. Tom Michel, SJ—Dahlgren Chapel—Georgetown University

Today's reading from Ezekiel (2:2-5) is one of the clearest passages in the Bible teaching the nature of prophecy. It begins:

"The Lord spoke to me".....

Prophecy begins with God, not human initiative.

"The Spirit entered into me..."

God sends Spirit, divine grace, not by human power

"..and set me on my feet"....

God is the one who is giving strength, enabling the prophet

"I heard the one speaking say to me"...

Prophet gets message from God

"I am sending you to the Israelites"....

God sends prophet to God's people

"who rebelled, revolted."

God's people are not acting like they should

"hard of face, obstinate of heart..."

They don't want to hear, learn, obey

"You shall say, "Thus says the Lord"..."

Prophet confronts them with truth

"whether they heed or resist'..."

Either way, the prophet has delivered the message

"they will know that a prophet..."

They have been confronted with the divine word

In the second reading, 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, Paul warns that it is very easy for a prophet to become proud, arrogant: "I have the truth. I know what you need."

He can be selfish, seek his own glory, power, etc. Some prophets have been seduced by power and become demagogues, petty dictators. A true prophet has to learn humility, realize it is God's message, God's glory to be served. He is merely an instrument.

St. Paul believes that God gave him "a thorn in the flesh", "an angel of Satan to beat him." Was it sexual temptation, chronic bladder infection, migraine, constant back pain? We don't know what he is referring to.

But Paul writes that the Lord tells him "My grace is sufficient for you." If you remember anything from what I say this morning, always remember the Lord's promise. "My grace is sufficient for you."

In Mark's Gospel passage (6:1-6) Jesus is preaching in Nazareth: Where did he get this wisdom? He was not from an aristocratic family. He didn't attend a theological school. He was the son of a carpenter. It's like saying "He's the janitor's son." Why listen to him? We know his whole family, who does he think he is?

The prophet is the inspired outsider, not part of the power structure, defies stereotypes, not who you think it should be, not what you were expecting. We think prophets are those who agree with us and give our enemies what they need to hear. The harsh reality is that none of us wants to take seriously the message of the prophet. We find reasons to reject what they say.

I want to take the example of a group of prophets in our day.

They are speaking the truth to our society in ways that are difficult to accept. They're outside the centers of power; they're not interested in power. They come from among us, our homes, families, towns.

We might admire them from afar. Sometimes we ridicule them, dismiss them as irrelevant. Our television shows make fun of them, trivialize them. We want to correct or condemn them if they disagree with our views—all of which means we don't have to take them seriously and learn from them.

The prophetic group I have in mind are the nuns, the sisters, the women religious.

When the documents of Vatican II appeared, most of us picked and chose. We picked the things we liked, but we ignored those that challenged the comfortable religiosity we had fashioned for ourselves. Some found Vatican II a threat and began to interpret the Council in ever more restrictive ways.

But the sisters---more than the hierarchy, the clergy and the laity—took the Council documents seriously.

They formed discussion groups, studied the documents, had seminars and workshops on how they might best put into practice what the documents taught. Obedient to Vatican II, they went back to their original charisms, tried to reconstruct their religious life in ways their founding mothers envisioned. They gave up the privileges and security their distinctive dress gave them, gave up the vast convents in which they had lived and rented small apartments where they could live close to the poor to serve them better.

These women, like all the prophets before them, have not hesitated to speak the truth to power.

In Uganda, the Italian nun Sister Rachelle rescued 109 orphan girls after they had been kidnapped in a raid by the notorious warlord Joseph Kony. With a male catechist, she set off on a four-day trek on foot through the jungle, and confronted the warlord in his home base. She demanded the girls, which he restored to her.

Sr. Dorothy Kazel, of Cleveland Ohio, was an Ursuline nun in El Salvador, delivering medical supplies to clinics in impoverished villages and refugee camps. On December 2, 1980, she along with three other US religious women, were raped, murdered and dumped in shallow graves. When their bodies were eventually found and exhumed, the two Maryknoll sisters were buried in El Salvador among the people they served. For the other two, the US State Department charged their families \$3500 each to bring the bodies back to the states for burial.

These are stories of dramatic heroism. But today's nuns challenge our society daily in less dramatic ways.

They challenge our lifestyle.

These women have given up the very human and praiseworthy aspirations of romantic love, motherhood, family, home, grandchildren, to live a life of love for God and service to the poor, the weak and the vulnerable. They live in urban slums, in poor conditions and small apartments and serve in parishes, hospitals, schools, halfway houses, HIV clinics and homes for battered women.

They prophetically challenge our prejudices and our complacency.

We think that religion is for people who have their lives in order, but the sisters remind us that Christ came for sinners and had special love for those who are rejected, suffering, and mourning. They identify with those they serve and stand with them in their struggles for justice and dignity.

They challenge us theologically.

They remind us that the Church's highest teaching authority is an ecumenical council. Vatican II was not a jamboree, or a big meeting of bishops, or a media show or something that was good for its time, but whose time is past or a doctrinal buffet from which we can pick and choose what we like and ignore what we don't. The Vatican Council is essentially the Holy Spirit teaching us the meaning of the Christian faith for our time, a teaching that not even a Pope or bishop can deny and remain faithful to our Catholic tradition. The sisters learned from the Council and adjusted their lifestyles to its counsels, rather than adapting its teaching to their theological preferences.

Finally, the sisters challenge us by showing us what is important in life.

It is not how much we earn, or what letters we have behind our names or what clothes we wear, or how we look or how big our house is. But how much love and care for others, how much fidelity to God's Word has filled our lives. When I recall the many sisters I've known, I remember the words of the prophet Micah: "O humankind, what God asks of you is simply this: that you act justly, live faithfully, and walk humbly with your Lord."

This is the prophetic message our sisters bring to all of us. Yet sisters are aging and there aren't many young ones. We must all ask ourselves, "Who among us will take up the prophetic mission that the sisters have borne for so long in our Church?"